History 219: The American Jewish Experience: From Shtetl to Suburb

University of Wisconsin, Madison  
Fall 2012  
M-W-F 12:05-12:55 (Humanities 1111)

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Course Description

A century and a half ago, the United States was a backwater of the Jewish world, then centered in Europe and the Ottoman Turkish Empire. Yet, by the 1950s, the United States became home to the largest, most prosperous, and most secure Jewish community in modern history. Why did millions of Jews come to the United States? How has life in a liberal political and capitalist economic order shaped the Jewish experience in America? In turn, how have Jews influenced American culture, politics, and society? This course surveys the history of American Jews from the 18th century to the 21st century. Topics include patterns of politics, social mobility, Jewish culture in Yiddish and English, inter-ethnic group relations, gender and sexuality, religion, and problems in community building. The course combines lectures, in-class discussions, film, and audio recordings. Readings consist of secondary and primary sources.

Books


All assigned books are on reserve at College Library. They are also available for purchase at the Rainbow Bookstore Cooperative located at 426 W. Gilman.

The required course packet is available for purchase at the Copy Center on the first floor of the Humanities Building.

- # = scholarly articles in course packet
- * = primary documents in course packet

**Course Requirements**

You are required to attend lectures and discussion sections. Failure to participate actively in the discussions will result in a failing grade for participation (see below). The assigned reading should be completed in time for your discussion section. (Your TAs may give you brief assignments for sections.) Plagiarism will result in a failing grade for the course and disciplinary action. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please consult with the teaching assistant or me. Finally, computers or any other electronic devices are not permitted during lectures and discussions.

An in-class midterm exam, one six-page take-home assignment, and a final exam are required.

- Participation and attendance: 20%
- Midterm exam (Oct. 12): 25%
- Take-home assignment (Nov. 12): 25%
- Final exam (Dec. 20): 30%

**The Kutler Lectures**

The Center for Jewish Studies’ annual Kutler Lectures will take place on November 12 and 13. Attendance at both lectures is a requirement. This year’s speaker is Prof. Beth Wenger (Univ. of Pennsylvania). Prof. Wenger will speak on the following topics.

- Nov. 12 (7:00 p.m., location TBA): “Civic Lessons: Jews and American National Holidays.”
- Nov. 13 (4:00 p.m., location TBA): “The Making of American Jewish Men: The Construction of Jewish Masculinities in American Culture.”
Lectures and Reading

Week 1 (Sept. 5-7): Introduction

Week 2 (Sept. 10-14): Becoming Citizens: Jews in Colonial and Early America


Course Packet:
* Article VI and the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America (1789).

Week 3 (Sept. 17-21): The Rise of American Jewry

Note: class canceled for Rosh Hashanah on Sept. 17.

Sarna, American Judaism, pp. 62-207.

Course Packet:
* Conference of Reform Rabbis, “The Pittsburgh Platform” (1885).
* Solomon Schechter, “Catholic Israel” (1896).
* The Orthodox Jewish Congregational Union of America (1898).

Week 4 (Sept. 24-28): The Great Eastern European Migration


Course Packet:

Week 5 (Sept. 24-28): Labor and Protest

Note: class canceled on Sept. 26 for Yom Kippur.

Tony Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, pp. 1-124.

Course Packet:
* Bernard Vaynshteyn, “The Birth of the Knee-Pants Makers’ Union” (1924).

Week 6 (Oct. 1-5): The Yiddish Cultural Renaissance

Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, pp. 125-216.
Week 7 (Oct. 8-12): At Home in America?
(Note: midterm exam on Oct. 12)


Course Packet:
- *B. Sheyfer, “A Language that He Wants To and Must Forget” (1918).

Week 8 (Oct. 15-19): Judaism Reconstructed


Course Packet:

Week 9 (Oct. 22-26): Jews in American Popular Culture

Course Packet:

Week 10 (Oct. 29-Nov. 2): The “Red Decade”

Course Packet:

Week 11 (Nov. 5-9): World War II, the Holocaust, and the State of Israel


Course Packet:
#Aaron Berman, Nazism, the Jews and American Zionism, 1933-1948 (Wayne State Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 96-184.

**Week 12 (Nov. 12-16): Contentment and Its Costs: Jews in Post-War America**
(Null: The Kutler Lectures take place on Nov. 12 and 13. As explained in the Course Requirements section, attendance is mandatory.)

(Also note: take-home assignment due on Nov. 12)

Sarna, American Judaism, pp. 272-306.

**Course Packet:**
#Riv-Ellen Prell, Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation, (Beacon Press, 1999), pp. 142-208.

**Week 13 (Nov. 19): Communal Consensus and Conflict**
(Null: class canceled on Nov. 21 and 23 for Thanksgiving)

Michael Staub, Torn at the Roots, pp. 1-111.

**Week 14 (Nov. 26-Nov. 30): Communal Consensus and Conflict, cont.**

Staub, Torn at the Roots, pp. 112-279,

**Course Packet:**
**“Negro-Jewish Relations in America: A Symposium” (1966).**
**“Aviva Cantor Zuckoff, “Oppression of America’s Jews” (1971).**
**“Ezrat Nashim: Jewish Women Call for Change” (1972).**

**Week 15: (Dec. 3-7): Jews in American Popular Culture (act 2)**

**Course Packet:**
*Lenny Bruce, “Jewish and Goyish” (c. 1960).
*Philip Roth, “Shikses and Other Goyim” (from the novel Portnoy’s Complaint, 1967).
Week 16 (Dec. 10-14): Assimilation or Renewal?


Final Exam: Dec. 20 @ 7:45-9:45 a.m.